DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 239 303 CS 208 127

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TITLE Paradigm Shifts in the Study of Literature.
PUB DATE [Jun 83]
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the National Women's Studies Association Conference (Columbus, OH, June 26-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Authors; Course Content; English Curriculum; Evaluation Criteria; *Females; *Feminism; Higher Education; Literary Criticism; Literary Genres; *Literary History; *Literature Appreciation; Reader Response; *Sex Bias; Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Feminist Criticism; *Womens Literature

ABSTRACT

The current literary tradition observes a canon of hierarchies, a ranking of great writers and genres, that tends to exclude or downgrade women and lower caste males. The response of feminist scholars to this state of affairs falls into two general categories: the first is to find great women authors to fit into the canon on its own terms; the second is to question the value of the canon itself. Feminist art and literary critics have begun to dismantle the notion that a work of art is autonomous, favoring instead a theory of social context and of alternative and equally valid codes of merit. Another feminist approach uses the reader-response theory, which states that the reader's perception of a text will be determined by his or her social background and status. Finally, feminist critics are engaged in the process of constructing alternative canons. While this process has inherent dangers, women are doing valuable work on developing cases to cope with, subvert, adopt, or adapt to their own uses the dominant male genres. As these codes and patterns become clearer, the value of works by women and the justification for including them in the general curriculum become more apparent. Still needed, however, is more study of the ways in which women have, in their turn, affected the male literary tradition. (HTH)

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Paradigm Shifts in the Study of Literature

Margaret Miller

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Paradigm Shifts in the Study of Literature

"What you see depends partly on what you look at and partly on how."

Margaret Atwood

I. The Canon

The central problem faced by feminist humanities scholars is the canon, the List carved in the marble of anthologies and syllabi which we must pass on to our students so that they can undergo what Marx called "the bureaucratic baptism of knowledge." Actually, though, each discipline has a series of interlocking hierarchies: the professors, as Virginia Woolf noted, have measuring rods up their sleeves and are most anxious to determine who is better than whom and what is better than what. In English literature, for instance, there is not only the ranking of great writers; we also have a hierarchy of genres. The epic is better than tragedy, which ranks above lyric poetry, which is superior to the novel. Then there is the great dividing line, below which fall the "sub-literary" genres: life writing, including autobiographies, journals and letters (in that order); essays; and popular fiction.

The genre list strikes me as particularly revelatory. The inclusion of a writer on the author list is usually defended on the grounds of universality and complexity, but the generic list is rarely if ever defended. It does have a perceptible logic, however, which I think sheds light on the hidden criteria of the author list. Those genres rank high on it which demonstrate access to an exclusionist code, generally learned through masculine academic channels, on the part of author and reader; this

has the practical effect--or is it cause?--of limiting both the class and gender of readers and authors. Another characteristic of privileged texts is that their action occurs in the public realm. This again excludes women and lower-caste males; the former have generally not been that mobile and the actions of neither group have been seen by the dominant culture as publicly important. So, for instance, the epic is better than the novel because it is written in masculine code, a classical language or at least replete with classical allusions; it also focuses on a protagonist who operates in the public realm and whose behavior is seen as having national or universal importance. These criteria, as I said, affect the rankings on the author list, even with "inferior" genres: Joyce raised the status of his novel Ulysses by claiming kin with Homer; Tolstoy is said to be better than Austen because he takes "events of national importance" (war, not peace) for his theme. There have been some interesting shifts in these criteria over time: once Greek and Latin ceased to be the masculine linguistic domain par excellence, as Gilbert and Gubar have pointed out, they lost some of their exclusionist power; they seem to have been replaced by sports, military, and political codes. In the future, the language of the initiates may be computerese.

Other humanities disciplines have their hierarchies with similar rationales. In art history, as Natalie Kampfen has described it, for instance, painting is better than sculpture which is better than folk art (in general, the useless is better than the useful, so that the aesthetic is better than the political, and the two are different). Some other rankings:

"tough" is better than "soft"; white is better than yellow which is better than Black; the individual is better than the collective; the heroic than the domestic; and so on. History has a progressivist, Western-European bias, so that Western-European "civilization" (the public activities of privileged men) is the supreme product of historical evolution. In general what we see, in short, is hierarchies which exclude or downgrade women and lower-caste males.

II. Feminist Responses

The response of feminist scholars to this state of affairs falls into two general categories. The first is the attempt to find "great women" who fit into the canon on its own terms. Pushing for the inclusion of Emily Dickenson into American literature lists comes under this heading. The second, more radical response is to look at the values of the canon itself. It must be admitted that here, as Lillian Robinson has noted, feminist scholarship is in a state of confusion. Are the scholars who take this tack, for instance, claiming that the values of the canon are wrong? We can pretty generally agree that exclusionist values are corrupt, but what about the other ones I mentioned by which individual writers are often defended: for instance universality and aesthetic, moral, and intellectual complexity? It is clear that in the past the criterion of universality meant, for all practical purposes, that which was familiar to privileged white males. As Monique Wittig has pointed out, traditional readers don't see the universal values in a Lesbian text--all they see are perverse particulars. It

is also clear that the standard has been applied inequitably: living within some kind of family is even for males a more universal experience than going to war, but the domestic has traditionally been considered "trivial" subject matter while the "heroic" has not. But does that mean that the concept of universality is too restrictively applied or that it is bankrupt? After all, the only truly universal experiences are birth and death; is any literature not dealing with those subjects uninteresting? The criterion of complexity is equally problematic: is complexity a virtue in a folk tale, and if not, are folk tales without virtue? The complexities of irony have only in the past generation of readers become fashionable, so now we find irony in texts which we have pleasure in, in order to justify their canonization.

If we do come to the conclusion that present criteria for canonical status are unworkable or cognitively meaningless, then what do we do? Are we willing to supplement or replace them with other standards? This is an issue which feminist scholars have largely evaded. Are we willing to make "non-aesthetic" criteria such as misogyny or racism or homophobia a reason to judge a canonized writer diminished in stature, as Wayne Booth does Rabelais? Surprisingly few feminist critics after Kate Millett have been willing to take this stance, at least explicitly and publicly.

The most dislocating possibility is, of course, that since we see that all criteria are developed by individuals with gender, class, race, and sexual preference biases, we must reject canon-making itself. If we do this, though, what do we teach?

What we individually find interesting? But then we have to extend the same privilege to our more numerous traditional colleagues. And on what grounds do we construct not just course syllabi but curricula? If we decide on a principle of inclusiveness, how do we decide what genres or groups of people are included, since semesters are finite, and what examples of each of these do we pick and on what grounds? Feminist scholars have barely begun to tackle these issues.

We are, however, doing some more immediately manageable tasks. First of all, feminist art and literary critics have begun to dismantle the notion--crucial to canon-making and implicit in claims of universality--that the work of art is autonomous. We have joined ranks with other schools of criticism and with other disciplines in reintroducing the ideas of social context and of alternative and equally valid codes. An autobiography based on the Chinese talk-story may be as aesthetically interesting as one based on Scriptural narrative, but a critic who is unaware of Chinese literary tradition and culture will be blind to its patterns and hence find them unintelligible.

This leads to another direction in literary criticism, feminist reader-response theory. Just as the work of art is embedded in and gains meaning and value from a social context, so the reader's perception of a text will be determined by her or his social background and status. Some critics have paid special attention to how women have resisted cultural imposition of masculinist values, how they have prevented injuries being done to them if they can't or won't accept these values. More needs to be done on this, particularly with respect to racial

and class variables. For example, what reading strategies are adopted by a strong black woman reading "Snow White," in which beauty is portrayed as passive and white?

Finally, feminist critics are engaged in the process of constructing alternative canons--this is where most of our energies have gone. That this process has its dangers should be abundantly clear from the discussion of canon-making. While a scholar who constructs a "canon" of women writers is at least aware of a competing male canon, she may all too often exhibit the same kind of arrogant ignorance of writing by women of color, working-class women, or Lesbians that men have had about women writers in general. Nevertheless, some valuable work is being done on the codes that women have developed for themselves to cope with, subvert, adopt, or adapt to their own uses the dominant male genres. As these codes and patterns become clearer, we have more and more grounds on which to understand and value these works and to justify their study as part of the general curriculum. What we need more study of are, among other things, the ways in which these women in their turn have affected the male tradition--the way, for instance, the great influx of female writers into the novel at the beginning of the nineteenth century changed the shape of the genre. On the meta-level, we need to consider how the inclusion of women's work affects our descriptions of a given tradition--for example how a consideration of the literature of American women changes our definition of "the American experience." That path of inquiry, which some critics are beginning to travel down, should also lead to a more inclusionist curriculum.

There is much work yet to be done. Some of the crucial questions, like in what does the value of a literary text consist or what do we decide to teach and why, have not been answered--indeed, have barely been asked. The shape of the ideal curriculum of the future, balanced to reflect the experience of the entire world's population, is very indistinct. But as Gerda Lerner said about the reevaluation of history, we've only been at the task for 14 years--14 years to begin to dismantle what took 6000 years to build. We've only just begun.

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